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AN ADDRESS

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✓
BY THE REV. GARDINER SPRING, D.D.
Pastor of the Brick Church, New York.

ADDRESS.

I HAVE never appreciated the embarrassment of addressing you, my young friends, until I am now, in the providence of God, called to this service. I shall not probably suggest a thought that has not frequently been suggested by those who have been called to this service before me. But if I shall be so happy as to present a few topics before your minds in such a light as shall have the least tendency to *increase and extend your usefulness* as men, as the ministers of Christ, I shall be abundantly gratified in the few moments I am allowed to enjoy with you.

The tendencies of piety are to produce good. "A good tree bringeth forth *good fruit*." The high aim of the true Christian is to be *useful*. This is the tendency of his spirit, his affections, his desires, his hopes, his efforts, his whole renewed character. It is not that he may be a *splendid man*, but a *useful man*.

A minister of the Gospel presses after a prize of very questionable lawfulness, when he aims at being a *splen-*

did minister; but he has no misgivings of conscience when he honestly aims at being a *useful minister*. He will be very apt to be disappointed if he aims at being a *great and splendid minister*; but he will rarely, if ever, miss his mark, if he aims at being a *useful minister*.

You have a thousand times been told, that to meet the high claims of the work for which you are preparing, you must possess *ardent and uniform piety*. Your *usefulness* will, in a great measure, depend upon the power which the religion of the Gospel exerts upon your own soul. To this, more than any other cause, may be traced the secret power of such men as Baxter, Edwards, Brainerd, and Payson. One reason why so many ministers live to so little purpose is, that while they may perhaps be good men, they are obviously *deficient* in that personal piety which has a transforming effect upon the heart and deportment. God and heaven are not the point of attraction towards which their minds and efforts are perpetually tending. I have known ministers of splendid talents not half so useful as many of their humbler brethren; and who probably will not be found in those illumined departments of the heavenly city, where they "that turn *many* to righteousness shall shine as the stars for ever and ever." You never can be faithful ministers, and therefore you never can be *useful* ministers, without fervent piety. You will not be faithful to the truth of God, nor to the souls of men. You will not take pleasure in your work, nor endure its trials, nor be eminently successful in

winning souls to Christ, without fervent piety. Piety, my young friends, must be your great adornment, and give your character its lustre. The bare hopes of piety, and even its predominating graces, ought not to satisfy you. Her self-denying spirit, her heaven-aspiring affections, her exalted and humbling joys, her unreserved self-devotement, her increasing purity, her sweet sensibility and tenderness, her absorbing confidence in the cross, and her deep and restless solicitude for the best interests of men; these, under a wise direction, will not fail to make you *useful ministers*.

It is almost too obvious a remark, especially to you, to say, that to be a useful minister, a man must be *well instructed in the oracles of God*. But there are several reasons for making this remark, just at this time. You have the best opportunity for religious instruction of every kind. To say nothing of the excellent instructions you are receiving in the different departments of divine learning, immediately from the *Holy Scriptures*, which we all know to be the *only infallible rule* of faith and practice, the standards of faith adopted in this Seminary, I am more and more persuaded, must commend themselves to every reflecting and sober man. I know there is a growing prejudice against forming and subscribing creeds or confessions of faith; and it is not surprising that this prejudice should exist in a youthful mind. But if there are essential doctrines of the Gospel, and if these doctrines can be ascertained and defined, where is the impropriety of embodying them in some well digested formula?

By nothing has the baneful influence of error been so generally counteracted, and the cause of truth so generally promoted, as by judicious confessions of faith. New England owes her orthodoxy, under God, to the *Assembly's Catechism*; and not until that excellent summary of doctrine fell into disuse, did some of her churches decline from the faith of their fathers. Old England too, owes its remaining orthodoxy to the *thirty-nine articles*. And, where will you find a formula which more clearly ascertains and defines the system of doctrines taught in the Holy Scriptures, than the *Catechism and Confessions of Faith of the Presbyterian Church*? I am confident you will appreciate these remarks, gentlemen, and you will do so the more, the oftener you reflect upon them, unless you yourselves are carried about with every wind of doctrine, and fall away from the steadfastness of the Gospel. Equally confident, am I, that you have special cause for appreciating them at the present crisis of the American Church. Already are there such departures from the essential truths of the Gospel among us; already have so many become wavering and unsettled in their religious sentiments, that there is peculiar obligation on those who are preparing for the sacred office, to *investigate and understand* the meaning of the Bible. Do not allow yourselves to be satisfied with *vague notions* of the truth of God. To this we have seen, to our sorrow, not a few of the youthful Ministry are exposed. As the guardians of this sacred Seminary, the Directors have not a little solicitude that no youth should go from these walls before

he has formed a well digested system of religious truth. Let it be a maxim with you to have *no views, only so far as they are definite*. It were unspeakably better to understand a few truths well, and to know them certainly, than to expatiate vaguely over the extended fields of Christian science. The *certainty* of knowledge is a very different thing from the *extent* of knowledge. Because you may have but a *partial* and *imperfect* view of divine truth, it does not follow that you must of necessity be in darkness and uncertainty in relation to those truths with which you are familiar. Though no man that ever lived, should perfectly know all that God has revealed, this would not prove that he does not know many things with perfect *definiteness* and *certainty*. Though our natural eye-sight is limited, so that we cannot see beyond a certain circle, nor all things at once in any circle, yet, we can see one thing at a time, and that clearly. The same is true of the understanding. Though we may have no knowledge about some truths, and though we cannot contemplate and compare many truths at once; yet we can contemplate one thing at a time, and compare a few things together, and hence come to a definite and certain knowledge of such things as we can discern and compare, and from one truth clearly discover another, and so make slow, but progressive advancements in knowledge. And thus it is that we shall see clearly, and exhibit impressively the harmony, connexion, and consistency of the great truths which the Gospel reveals. It is this *definiteness* of view which we affectionately and urgently recommend to you. One

doctrine of the Bible consistently understood, will almost necessarily lead a devout and inquiring mind to perceive and appreciate, the harmony and connexion which run through all the peculiar and essential doctrines of the Gospel. The student who thoroughly understands one doctrine of the Gospel, will be very apt to understand another and another. Once let your views of divine truth be definite, and there is little danger that they will long remain distinct and prominent. Clear and definite views of God's truth, combined with ardent piety, go far to make a *useful minister*. If the treasures which infinite wisdom has accumulated in the Bible, abundantly enrich, and adorn, and give practical utility to the *Christian* character, how much more to the *ministerial*? Aim at high attainments in Christian knowledge. If you cannot excel in every thing, excel in this. Labour, study, *pray*, to excel in this. To be burning and shining lights, you must feel the pre-eminent claims of religious truth.

Another characteristic of a useful minister, is *untiring diligence and energy of action*. It was not by his talents merely, nor simply by his fervent piety, nor was it only by his enlarged views of the truth of God, but by his indefatigable diligence and action combined, with these, that the Apostle Paul accomplished a greater amount of good, than was ever accomplished by any other man. The life of a useful minister is an *eventful life*. It is fruitful in benevolent results. His energy is not developed so much upon set occasions, or by studied effort: his whole life is full of labours and events that are in-

imately connected with the best interests of men. I know of no class of men who labour more, or more severely, than FAITHFUL *ministers of the Gospel*. There are good ministers, pious men, who are called to contend with most inactive and sluggish habits, both of body and mind; and there are those who are never satisfied and happy unless they are in some way actively employed; and the difference in the aggregate of good accomplished by these two classes of men, will be found, in the course of years, to be immense, and almost incalculable. Let every young man who is looking toward the sacred office, settle it in his mind, that all his indolent habits must be broken up, if he has the most distant hope of becoming a useful minister of Christ! If he is not willing to harness himself for labour, he had better never enter the field. All the springs of his life will run down without effort. His hope and courage will sink and die away, if he has no spirit of enterprize. He will soon become a burthen to himself, and a cumberer of the ground. Perhaps I conceded too much, when I said that such ministers might be *good men*. A slothful minister is a contradiction, which it is very difficult to reconcile with the lowest standard of holiness. A man who is born for immortality; ruined by sin; redeemed by the blood and Spirit of Jesus Christ: put into the sacred ministry; set to watch for souls; promised a reward that outweighs all the material universe; and yet, murmur at hardship, and complain that he must spend and be spent in the service of his Redeemer! My young friends, we hope better things of *you*. God expects better things. The Church demands them. The

age, the land which gave you birth, and nurtures you for scenes of toil and triumph such as the generations that are gone have never witnessed, expects better things of you, and things that accompany salvation to your own soul, and to this dying world.

To be eminently useful, you must also be *men of prayer*. In this respect every minister would do well to keep before his mind the example of such men as Luther, Knox, Whitfield, and Martyn. Nothing has so powerful a tendency to subdue the unhallowed affections of the mind, and the grosser appetites and passions of the body; nothing will so certainly control and direct your thoughts, and elevate them above all that is base and grovelling, trifling and *little*, as frequent and intimate fellowship with God. The great secret of mortifying a worldly spirit is to cultivate a heavenly one. "*Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lusts of the flesh.*" "*Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed, by the renewing of your minds.*" No where does the world appear so much like an empty shadow, and no where is its baleful influence so certainly counteracted, as in sweet communion with things unseen. You will find also, that prayer furnishes the strongest stimulus, the most powerful incitement to self-denying duty and toil. And who has not observed that intelligent, earnest prayer improves all the powers and properties of the soul, and wakes up the mind from her sluggishness and apathy, to the exercise of the best and most ennobling affections? No where does that wonderful system of truth, that "mighty range of motive," disclosed

in the Bible, obtain its sure and certain dominion over the soul, if not in the frequency, seriousness, and joys of familiarity with God. Were the history of ministers made known, I have no doubt that you might trace the distinguished usefulness of the most distinguished men to their closets. If you will review your own history, I think you will not fail to see that those periods of it have been most distinguished for usefulness, that have been most distinguished for prayer. The late Dr. Payson, in suggesting a few hints to a youthful brother in the Ministry, among other most valuable remarks, has the following: "*The disciples, we read, returned to Jesus, and told him all things; what they had done, and what they had taught.*" I think that if we would every evening come to our Master's feet, and tell him where we have been; what we have done; and what where the motives by which we have been actuated; it would have a salutary effect upon our whole conduct. While reading over each day's page of life, with the consciousness that he was reading it with us, we should detect many errors and defects which would otherwise pass unnoticed." It is this familiarity with Jesus—they are these unaffected approaches to the throne of grace, through all the sins and duties, the mercies and trials of his course, that make the useful minister. I have seen ministers of very reserved habits in their intercourse with men, who were eminently useful because they conversed with God. You will *greatly abound* in the duty of prayer, if you are ever eminently useful in the sacred office.

It is also indispensable to distinguished and perma-

nent usefulness in a Minister of the Gospel that he *mortify an aspiring spirit*. Do not contend for pre-eminence. If you are thrown among those who contend for it, retire from the conflict. Strive to do good, and if your motives are impeached, let your habitual deportment be your only defence of them. I say again, beware of an aspiring spirit. There is scarcely any thing that has a stronger tendency to neutralize and counteract the benevolent designs of good men, than a self-complacent, aspiring spirit. *Beware* of it. Learn of him who was "meek and lowly in heart." He "that exalteth himself shall be abased, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted." "Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."

A Minister of the Gospel, to be eminently useful, must also be distinguished for no small share of *earnestness and zeal*. On this point I feel afraid of leaving a wrong impression on your minds. Zeal, without judgment and discrimination, spoils a man for a minister of the Gospel. A venerable clergyman once said, "I would make deficiency in *prudence* the ground of quite as serious and insurmountable objection against laying hands on a candidate for the Ministry, as I would a deficiency in piety or knowledge." Be ye "wise as serpents and harmless as doves." You have seen many a man who possessed commendable qualifications for the sacred office, concerning whom, after all, it might be said, *he is not a safe man*. You may possess exemplary piety, and distinguished talent, but without practical wisdom, you cannot become a useful minister. And

yet discretion may degenerate into timidity; may even lead to a trimming and calculating servility. A minister's character that is formed on the highest models of usefulness, must be distinguished for decision, energy, and zeal, as well as self-diffidence and discretion. There is no danger that your zeal will be too ardent, so long as it is the expression of *simple benevolence*. Seek not your own will, but the will of the Father who hath sent you, and you cannot be too zealous. Only be sure that your heart glows with the benevolence of the Gospel, and the flame cannot rise too high. True zeal will find its choicest aliment in cultivating the spirit of Jesus Christ. At a great remove from that false fervour and electric fire which has its origin in a selfish and ambitious mind, which hurries men on to act without consulting the sober dictates of their understanding, and which is distinguished for its subtilty, turbulence, and fickleness, it takes its rise from the meek and gentle spirit of holy love. It is warmed and fanned into flame by every breath of heavenly affection. It is simple, because it has nothing to disguise. It is strong and steady, because it is deliberate and cautious. It is unwearied, because, like the heaven-born charity from which it flows, "it seeketh not its own." And where shall we look for such a spirit, if not in the ministers of Christ? Where are there incentives to such a spirit, if not in the cross of Christ? Where did Paul find it, where did the primitive Christians find it, but in the love of Christ? What can support such a spirit, but those awful and touching realities, those weighty and tender truths which are ex-

hibited with such irresistible energy and vividness, in that wonderful redemption of which you hope to become the messengers to your apostate fellow men? A slight and cursory view of your great work, my young friends, will not answer the purpose of your high calling. Your minds must be roused to the importance of it; you must think intensely, and feel deeply; all your powers of body and mind must be awakened and invigorated in the service of your divine Master; nor should your resolution be impaired, or your efforts relaxed, till you are summoned from the field.

There is another topic on which I will make a few observations, which has an intimate relation to your usefulness, as the ambassadors of the Gospel of peace: and that is, the importance of exercising a *kind and fraternal spirit*. Charity suffereth long and is *kind*. Charity is not easily provoked. Charity thinketh no evil. Charity beareth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. O, if this spirit of kindness—this mutual forbearance—this patience of injury—this freedom from suspicion and jealousy—this spirit of fraternal love and confidence were more prominent in the character of the ministers of Christ, how would they adorn the doctrine of God their Saviour, and recommend religion to the world! If I do not misinterpret, nor pervert the signs of the times, the day is near when there will be a peculiar demand for the cultivation of this spirit in the American churches. Deeply does it concern you, to wipe away this dark and foul reproach which stains the ministerial character. “If a man say, I love God, and hate his

brother, he is a liar; for if he love not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God, whom he hath not seen?" How often have we seen the usefulness of ministers lamentably circumscribed through the want of a kind and affectionate spirit! There are ministers who need nothing but brotherly kindness to make them patterns of every thing that is praiseworthy. I know that the constitutional temperament of good men is various; but there is no apology for the man whose external light is on the wane, because the glow of kindness declines within. You live in such an evil world; a world where there are so many occurrences that are unavoidably painful—so many wrongs to be encountered and forgiven, and where there are such frequent requisitions for the exercise of a kind spirit, that if you do not take special pains to cultivate it, all the better feelings of your hearts will be suppressed, and the manly and generous spirit of a heaven-born religion will lose its glory in the envyings and suspicions of an earthly and selfish mind.

In a word, gentlemen, strive to possess the *uniformity* of character which the Gospel requires. It is worth much effort, watchfulness, and prayer, to guard against the more common faults and blemishes of ministerial character. It concerns you to cultivate every grace and virtue, and to be adorned with all the beauties of holiness. The usefulness of a minister of the Gospel depends much on this *uniformity* of character. As "*dead flies* cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour, so doth a *little folly* him that is in reputation for wisdom and honour." *Little things* have more to do in

the formation of a spotless moral character, than we are at once willing to believe. Especially beware of *little deviations* from sterling rectitude. "He that is faithful in that which is least, is faithful also in that which is much; and he that is unjust in the least, is unjust also in much." Little things exert a prodigious influence on the character of the ministers of the Gospel. It is impossible for the man who neglects them to command respect, or to be extensively useful. It is this *uniformity* of ministerial character which conciliates confidence and veneration, and which everywhere bespeaks a benevolent and elevated mind. Such a minister of the Gospel will not live in vain. He may have his superiors in some particular traits of excellence, but in that happy assemblage of excellencies that go to form the *useful minister* of Jesus Christ, he is one of the lights of the world.

THE END.

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